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## by Steve Baretich

It wasn't that the Pacific Northwest didn't know about drum corps back in the mid-1960s, but Seattle was just about as far as you could get from the drum corps mainstream and, while the caliber of the Northwest corps did not match the Eastern and Midwest powerhouses, the region boasted a healthy local circuit with both large and small competitive corps from Washington and Oregon.

The Seattle Buddhist Scouts corps rarely ran in those circles. The predominantly Japanese corps was a church-sponsored, scouting-affiliated unit mostly content to represent its community by performing at parades and civic events.

In 1965, the Seattle Buddhist Scouts Drum and Bugle Corps took a rare opportunity to measure itself against its local counterparts by participating in a mid-winter competition hosted by the Seattle Thunderbirds. The tight, disciplined and large (by

# Seattle Imperials



Seattle Imperials, 1976 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Seattle Imperials, 1969, at the World Open (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

mid-1960s standards) corps enjoyed unexpected success, and realized they had competitive potential.

That success opened a rift. Some in the organization, the sweet taste of respect still in their mouths, wished for a more competition-oriented corps. Others argued that the group should maintain its focus on what they

considered to be the nobler aspects of the activity -- service to its members and the Seattle Buddhist community.

A group of members and parents broke away from the Buddhist Scouts. In 1966, the Imperials, under the direction of Bob Oki Sr. (who would remain at the helm through the 1972 season), took its show public.

"It was mostly just get 'em on the field and get 'em off," recalled Lorin Grinolds, an alumnus of the Thunderbirds, who wrote that first year's drill, an abbreviated program that the small corps (18 horns) performed at the state American Legion Championship.

By the next year, the corps, boasting new cadet-style uniforms in red, white and blue, was finishing in the middle of the pack. Even though they were still being bested by the established Seattle Shamrocks, the Thunderbirds and Columbians from Pasco, WA, the Imperials were serving notice that they meant to turn up the heat.

The corps had grown a bit by 1968, but was still being beaten regularly by the Shamrocks. The repertoire was the sort of eclectic mix typical of those times -- selections from "El Cid," "Victory at Sea," "Thoroughly Modern Millie," "Porgy and Bess," *Rawhide* and *Yesterday*. The standout color guard offered hints of what the corps would become best known for in the future.

The corps took its first tour outside the region that summer to the wilds of Casper, WY, for the Troopers' infamous "Drums in the Dust" competition, staged at the local rodeo grounds, where the kids from Seattle saw and heard what a drum corps could be.

In 1969, the Imperials won both the VFW and American Legion state championships. It was their first in a four-year streak of both state titles. They also took the long bus ride to Philadelphia for their first VFW Nationals (as did the Shamrocks, their cross-town rivals, who bested them at the big show).

In 1970, the ascendant Imperials took a tour of the Midwest, where they competed at such drum corps hotbeds as Racine, WI, and Des Plaines, IL. They returned to their home turf and prepared for the American Legion National Championships in Portland, OR, just a short ride down Interstate 5.

The remote location of that year's Legion convention kept most of the Midwestern and Eastern corps at home. But the Imperials, who had been mostly absent from the local scene that season, finished fourth at Legion Nationals, behind such worthy competition as the champion Santa Clara Vanguard, the Anaheim Kingsmen and Velvet Knights.

The Imperials' finish, seven points and four spots ahead of the Shamrocks, established the corps as the premier unit in the Northwest. The color guard finished second, one-tenth behind Santa Clara.

Some members of other corps in the area, the Shamrocks in particular, gravitated toward the Imperials following the 1970 season. The corps took the field in 1971 with 45 brass, 20 percussion and a 35-member color guard, making it far and away the largest corps in the region.

The 1971 Imperials color guard carried flags in solid red, white and blue, on which were silk-screened images of "The Zig Zag Man," the bearded, smoking fellow in the beret whose face adorns packages of Zig Zag brand rolling papers.

The look was in keeping with the corps'



Seattle Imperials, 1976 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

rock repertoire, which included *What Can a Friend Say*, *Free* and *Wooden Ships*, among other rock 'n' roll riffs. The corps announced its unorthodox 1971 look and sound to the international drum corps community in *Drum Corps Digest*. The world of drum corps and American culture in general were experiencing an era of rapid change. Whatever one made of the repertoire and the Zig Zag motif, there was no denying the Seattle Imperials were riding this new wave.

At the 1971 VFW Nationals in Dallas, the



Seattle Imperials, 1980 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps placed 20th on the strength of a solid horn line and excellent color guard, but with a drill that its creator, Grinolds, readily acknowledged was not up to date. The color guard finished eighth. If not for a timing penalty, they would have finished four positions higher.

The 1971 tour left the organization scraping for cash (that charter flight back home from Dallas didn't come cheap), so for 1972 a somewhat scaled-back corps stayed close to home, winning both state titles and performing in the usual assortment of parades. The corps retained some of the Keith Markey-arranged repertoire from the previous year and added local guy Mike Duffy to the brass staff.

The Imperials organization had purchased an old bowling alley in the city's South End and renamed it "Home of the Imperials." The building housed the corps' bingo parlor and provided an expansive rehearsal space.

Membership, while still largely Asian, was becoming more widely representative of its Southeast Seattle base of operations, a district among the most racially diverse in the country. The influx of former members of other corps and newcomers from the area brought other hues to "the Japanese drum corps" in the red, white and blue uniforms.

An exodus of many of the older members before the 1972 season (a handful made their way down to Anaheim to play with the Kingsmen) left the corps smaller than it had been in several years, but the organization had built a more secure financial base and, looking a few years ahead, actively recruited younger members. In 1973, the corps limited

itself to parades and standstills.

The new kids stuck with the corps and in 1974 toured the Northwest and California. Members recruited the old-fashioned way, luring junior high school classmates with promises of travel and fun. They grew and their skill levels grew along with them. In 1975, with former Kingsmen staffer Gary Keane in the director's seat, the corps went on a national tour, again taking the long bus ride to Philadelphia. Bob Oki Jr., the founding director's son, took over the percussion section that year. He would stay in the position through the 1981 season.

The next year the corps once again stayed close to home, marching in only four competitions. It would be the last year for the red, white and blue

cadet uniforms.

Going into the 1977 season, the staff,



Seattle Imperials, 1982 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

under the direction of Jack Uno, was hoping to attract more members and, for that reason, held back writing the show until May, when they could wait no longer. "We decided to go with what we had," said Imperial alumnus and then marching instructor Kenny Sakoda. "We took a 'what the hell' attitude and started coming up with ideas to at least make the year as much fun as possible."



Seattle Imperials, 1983 (photo by Mike Charles from the collection of Drum Corps World).

The staff, drum corps veterans and realists, knew the corps, with only 17 horns, wouldn't be seriously competitive. They shook off all but the faintest vestiges of the military model, took input into the design from the kids, generally yucked it up at rehearsals, outfitted the members in "uniforms" consisting of blue jeans, T-shirts, and "pimp" hats, and took the show on a national tour, finishing 32nd at DCI.

By this time, the corps had also taken on the look and feel the Imperials' winter guard had nurtured over the preceding couple of years. The new attitude Imperials -- smiles, dancing and accessible charts -- emerged under the influence of Santa Clara alumnus and former Kingsmen instructor Stanley Knaub. Knaub redefined the art and science of marching for the Imperials. It was all about smooth movement, fun and long hours learning how to move less like soldiers and more like dancers.

The Imperials' color guard, with its groundbreaking dance style, finished second at the 1977 DCI color guard championships. They went on to make a big impression at the inaugural Winter Guard International Championships, placing third in 1978 and fourth in 1979.

The 1978 Imperials, under the new direction of Bill Doolittle, was still on the small side, performing a jazzy, big band, swing show. The new uniforms -- polyester jumpsuits -- provided ease of movement required by Knaub's demanding, dance-driven drill. White shoes, belts and fedoras added that modern 1970s flare (it seemed appropriate at the time). The corps ended with a third-place class A finish at DCI.

By 1979, the new way of doing things attracted more members. Now boasting a respectable 34

brass players, wearing jeans and t-shirts, the Imperials took a short tour to California before setting off for DCI in Birmingham, AL. Building on the success of the innovative style they were known for, the corps achieved marked improvement in all areas. The show earned them 23rd place in DCI's open class.

Knaub's methods -- yoga, stretching and breathing exercises, and intense movement sessions -- continued to make an impact. This, in concert with Duffy and Oki's crowd-pleasing charts, pushed the experienced, well-rehearsed and tight-knit Imperials to their best finish ever -- 15th at the 1980 DCI Championships.

The 1980 corps spurred interest from drum corps types around the Western United States and Canada. The "most imported" member came all the way from England. For the 1981 season, a contingent of "imports"

took up residence at other members' homes. But the corps, while bigger, wasn't as polished as the previous year's version.

The imports made their way to Seattle as late as June, which left precious little time to work them into the show. Then came a major mid-season revision to the end of the show. The corps finished 20th at DCI.

Several years of national touring had taken its toll on financial resources. The 1982 tour would be the corps' last appearance at DCI. They placed 25th. It was a drop of 10 positions in two seasons, but the staff and members came away feeling generally upbeat.

That year's edition looked and felt much like the corps of a couple of years before. It was the same trimmed-down size as the 1980 corps and was a solid performance of a demanding, high-energy show. That

they had managed to put together a respectable corps and take it on tour was seen as a success in itself, especially in light of the financial difficulties they, like so many others, were facing. That 1982 show ironically ended with *The Party's Over*.

The 1983 program was mostly a revival of 1982. The repertoire from both years had the signature feel, including *Get Happy*, a blues medley and lengthy drum breaks crafted by percussion head Mike Whitney. The 1983 show closed with *Send in the Clowns*.

The junior high school kids who changed the look of the corps so dramatically a few years earlier were now shaving and holding down jobs and otherwise looking and behaving more like adults with adult responsibilities. A relatively senior contingent, including longtime color guard captain Mary Doolittle, either aged out or

Seattle Imperials, 1978 (photo by Mike Charles from the collection of Drum Corps World).



otherwise moved on after the 1982 season.

The Imperials organization looked forward to a new era of growing its own as it entered the 1983 season. With a handful of returning members and a bunch of young newcomers,

After getting their heads handed to them in June by the Argonauts and the up-and-coming Marauders, the Imperials persevered and claimed a narrow victory at the regional championships in mid-July.



Seattle Imperials, 1980 (photo from the collection of Steve Baretich)..

they competed only in the Northwest circuit. It may not have been the big time, but it was heated, spirited competition.

The momentum of 1983 carried through the fall and winter as the Imperials worked toward a promising 1984 season that would

never be. The money ran out.

The board decided a touring drum corps was something it could no longer sustain. They felt compelled to put the finances in order and later reorganized as the Imperials Music and Youth Organization. The drum corps and winter guard were no more, much to the disappointment of many members and alumni.

The new organization had a competitive field band for a few years, as well as other ensembles. The organization exists to this day as Music Works Northwest, offering music instruction and performance opportunities to people

Seattle Imperials, 1981 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Seattle Imperials, 1980 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).

of all ages.

The Imperials' story, for all its unique elements, is in many ways typical of what happened to other corps of that era. Success on the national scene meant the sort of financial burden most could not shoulder. As resources were devoted to large tours, participation in and support for the local circuits dwindled.

Many members and alumni moved on to march and staff other corps, carrying Knaub's methods with them. The influence of the Imperials and the late Stanley Knaub is plain to see in today's corps and color guards.



*Steve Baretich is a Seattle native who feels fortunate to have grown up in the right place at the right time. While in Mr. Knatt's band class at South Shore Middle School, he saw a movie of the 1975*

*Madison Scouts and found out what was going on at the Imperials bingo hall just down the street from his house. He marched with the Imperials while attending Garfield High School and then went on to march with the Marauders and Argonauts after the demise of his hometown corps.*

*After meeting his wife-to-be, Erin, while attending school in Spokane, they moved around the country, living in Eugene, OR; Lombard, IL; and Minneapolis, MN, where they were married and had their child, Miriam, while he marched with Minnesota Brass, Inc.*

*Now living back in Seattle, his main involvement with the activity is as an admiring fan of his daughter's color guard, Full Circle of the Sound. Baretich considers himself "a musician with a day job"; he manages an export office while coordinating a nine-piece Latin group, Banda Del Sol.*

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